

# The Marsupial Koala

**T**HE Koala (*Phascolarctos cinereus*) is one of Australia's unique animals. It comes under the mammalia's class. The Koala is a marsupial which means the pouched animal. The pouch of the Koala opens downward and sideways. Other features of the Koala are so unique that it has been given a family of its own, *Phascolarctidae*. The zoological generic *Phascolarctus* means 'Pouched bear'. Actually 'Koala' is an aboriginal word. It may mean "No drink", as the aborigines recognised that the Koala did not require water in the same manner as other animals.

Koalas were readily found along the eastern parts of Australia in the past; at present, they are less numerous, although found in similar areas along the

## By Keshar Man Tamrakar

coastal regions from North Queensland to Southern Victoria. There is a variation between the koalas of Northern Australia and those found in the South.

The northern koalas are smaller, the skull is shorter in both male and female, and the fur shorter, while the back has a red tawny colour, compared with the greyish brown of the New South Wales race. The Victorian koala is even more distinguishable with its robust build and shaggy coat.

**Main Features:** The koala build is squat and the body is covered with long dense fur, which is dark grey to brown on the back. The throat and breast are white and the abdomen dark brown to chocolate. The tail is rudimentary. Some of their main features are, a large black nose, large fur covered ears and brown eyes with vertical slit like pupils. The hand structure is porcupate, meaning two fingers working opposite the other three. The front and back limbs are heavily mus-

cled and carry large curved claws for climbing. On the fore paws, each of the five fingers are separate, but on the rear paws, the second and third toes are attached for most of their length, while the big toe is thickened and clawless. Both fore and hind limbs are designed for holding and climbing. The average weight of a southern male is 13.5 kilograms.

*The koala is not strictly nocturnal as one third of feeding occurs during daylight. However the peak feeding time is usually two hours after sunset.*

**Docile:** The Koala is a docile animal but when frightened, they bite and claw if interfered with. At night, the koala becomes active and may move about considerably covering comparatively long distances. Although agile in the trees, it is a clumsy mover on the ground and may become prey to foxes or packs of wild dogs. Its slowness of movement prevents it from avoiding bush fires, which today, are one of the greatest threats to its existence.

At night, in areas where they are numerous the koalas utter sounds resembling the grunting of pigs. The call of the male is a deep throaty grunt, while that of the female is higher. When alarmed or distressed, koalas make a continuous loud wailing sound.

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The main diet of the koalas is leaves, buds and stems of eucalypts (Gum trees). It does eat other vegetation, particularly in times of food shortage and is reputed to eat small amounts of earth occasionally, possibly to provide additional minerals to their diet.

Approximately, one kilogram

weight of gum leaves may be eaten by an adult koala in one day. Koalas spend a majority of their daylight hours sleeping in forks of trees.

**Solitary Existence:** The koalas mate during the summer months. The males are polygamous and females lead a solitary existence while carrying their young. The young are born after a gestation period of approximately a month. Twin

births are rare. The new born koala is about 20 millimeters long, it makes its way to the pouch, where it remains from five to six months. During the latter part of this period, it leaves and re-enters the pouch at will.

The young koala stays with the mother until it is approximately a year old. When the mother moves about, the young is carried on her back in a characteristic style. At other times it remains closely by or sleeps in the embrace of the parent.

**Unknown:** On leaving the pouch, the young koala grows at a rapid rate, when old enough and capable of leaving the parent, it weighs approximately 3 kilograms. Koalas mature in the third or fourth year. The life span of the koala in the native bush is not known exactly but exceeds ten years.

In the late part of the 19th century and early 20th century, the koala population decreased due to hunters after skin. A public outcry stimulated politicians to enact legislation to control this practice.

Populations of koalas are now protected and can no longer be exploited. Koala populations now occur in abundance from Victoria to North Queensland (Australia). □